

Maori land – vagaries and vexed inheritance for all land owners



PAUL MOON

Several years ago, I took a journey to Wellington by train. Sitting across from me were two elderly women. They lapsed into a silence that was only sporadically interrupted by comments about the passing scenery. An observation by one of the women stuck in my memory. It went something like this: 'Look at all the gorse there', she said disapprovingly while glaring out the window at a run-down farm, 'it must be Maori land'.

It was a shocking conclusion to reach based simply on the presence of gorse. What was it about some rural Maori land that left it less developed than neighbouring farms? Possibly, the woman who made the statement would have blamed it – if compelled to give an explanation – on the supposed laziness of the owners. The reality, however, is far more involved.

When the New Zealand Parliament began to pass laws affecting Maori land, from the late 1850s, one issue towered above the others: the process of converting communal tribal land to individual title. If Maori land was to be sold to meet the voracious settler demand for it, then purchasers had to be clear exactly what they were buying and from whom. The vagaries of communal title were plainly inadequate for this purpose.

Once Maori land was converted into individual title, the predictable script of

the fate of indigenous land during a phase of rapid colonisation was played out in this country. For the rest of the nineteenth century, Maori land ownership declined with alarming speed. From 1840, when Maori land holdings were around 66 million acres, by 1900, the total area of land under Maori control had fallen to just 5 million acres. In the intervening sixty years, Governments had acknowledged that this loss was a 'problem', but seldom were motivated to do anything about it.

There were concerted efforts to halt this loss of land. The King movement, and to a lesser extent the Kotahitanga movement, lobbied their members to refuse to sell their lands, and these land leagues generally failed.

It was only in 1900, when most of the damage had been done, that Seddon's Liberal Government belatedly passed two measures to 'protect' Maori land: the Maori Councils Act and the Maori Land Administration Act. The effect of these laws was that Maori land could not be sold, but could be leased to Europeans, and that the money earned from the leases would be paid back to the Maori landowners. It was a sound idea in principle, but struggled in practice. Europeans seemed to have an aversion to having Maori landlords, and Maori, for their part, found that the majority of their profits were being chewed up by

newly-applied rates, and the costs of administering the system.

Some politicians began to use the issue of impoverished Maori land as another weapon in their armoury to fight for the further alienation of this land from its indigenous owners. European farms, it was noted, were generally prospering, while Maori land lay – in the language of the West Coast Settlement Reserves Act 1892 – 'idle'.

The cause of this disparity in the relative success of European and Maori land is easily detectable. A government department had been set up in 1894 specifically to provide capital for European farmers. Maori landowners were effectively denied access to this same vital source of funds. Later, European farmers approached their banks for loans to assist further development, Maori could only watch these farmers prosper. Because Maori land could no longer be sold under the provisions of the 1900 legislation, no bank would lend to money to Maori farmers, knowing that their land could not be used as security.

As well there were often multiple owners of these blocks of Maori land, and as each generation passed, the number of owners multiplied. Gaining agreement from hundreds of owners as to how a piece of land should be managed proved virtually impossible in many cases, and so the land remained unused. Moreover,

when some shareholders – as is presently the case – measure their annual returns from their shareholdings in their ancestral lands not in dollars but in cents, it is understandable why their interest in the management of these lands has waned.

Maybe imaginative solutions need to be conceived in order to invigorate some Maori land holdings, and maybe a change in legislation could help, but one thing is certain: the complex historical inheritance of laws and policies that have shaped the state of much current Maori land make it difficult to formulate any generalisations about the condition of such lands, or the motives of its owners. **Dr Paul Moon is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Maori Development at AUT, and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.**

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Write to us:

Editor,
Te Waha Nui,
School of Communication Studies, AUT
Private Bag 92006
Auckland 1020
Email: wahanui@aut.ac.nz
www.journalism.aut.ac.nz

We welcome your feedback and views.

Tireless commitment

I congratulate you on the article by Kim Reed featuring Michelle Kidd and her work as Te Kaihono ki te Rangimarie for Methodist Mission Northern (No 5, September 17). It captures Michelle's passion and commitment to the community of people she works tirelessly for.

Kim obviously spent considerable time in the Mission's Airedale Community Centre, with Michelle, researching her piece. As she will have seen, the Centre is a very unique place and one that is fully reliant on donations to keep its doors open. There are a number of groups and individuals who support Michelle in her work and the Mission is extremely grateful for their support.

Thank you for featuring Michelle's work. Public awareness about the work of Methodist Mission Northern is not high and so an article such as Kim's helps promote the significant role this mission plays in the lives of the homeless people of inner city Auckland.
Lesley Mynett-Johnson (PhD)
Development Manager
Methodist Mission Northern
Auckland

Not so funny

I recently read the article about NZ's runway and modelling industry by Adam Stevenson (No 5, September 17). The article

itself was fine, and Adam's particular approach to the story was also fine. However, I took great offence at his closing remark. I am neither a model nor gay, and still I found that remark totally derogatory and demeaning of people in the industry.

Perhaps he was meaning to be funny, but on that he failed.

What a shame that someone in the editorial staff didn't see, or consider, the outcome of that kind of journalistic commentary.

Rhoda Scherman
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Health
AUT

Evolving 'baby'

It's been great to see *Te Waha Nui* continue to grow and evolve in new directions this year.

There is always a feeling of trepidation when someone else takes charge of your "baby" but I am still proud to say it is a professional looking student publication.

I think it's awesome that you have had the opportunity to publish more editions and have expanded the readership beyond the AUT campus.

Te Waha Nui has once again showcased AUT journo talent

It seems "The Big Mouth" has become a true inner-city rag which is cool (and should attract advertising which could be handy for the end of year party).

Being a 'student' journo isn't easy and these stories will be some of the hardest you'll ever write.

I still cringe at the well practised line: "Hi my name is ...and I'm a student journalist from AUT".

Keep up the good work and I look forward to meeting the class of 2004 in the workforce next year.

Jared Savage
First editor, *Te Waha Nui*
Reporter for the *Central Leader/Auckland City Harbour News*

BREAKFAST...



IT SAYS THIS HAS GOT 98% LESS EGO THAN BANKSIE-PUFFS TOO!



TIANA '04

Friendly read

Congratulations to the team which put *Te Waha Nui* together over the last few editions.

There has been a noticeable and refreshing change to the layout and the easy-to-follow sections make the paper "friendlier" and more enjoyable to read.

As a big sports fan, I would ask that consideration be given to a little more coverage of sport but that aside well done.

David Littlewood
Entertainer
Tauranga

TE WAHA NUI ON HOLIDAY

Sadly, this is our last edition for the year. *Te Waha Nui* will be back in 2005 with a new team of journalism students and a fresh batch of innovative stories.

Thanks for the feedback and support you have given us this year.